

so i can feel something by Monstrous_Femme

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Summary:

Nancy inhaled as hard as she could, then coughed as she let it out.

“Breathe in more gently but for longer,” Jonathan said. “It won’t hurt as much.”

“Show me,” she said, because Nancy Wheeler was a girl who did things right. If she wanted to do well in school, she’d do well in school. If she wanted to fight a monster, she’d fight a monster. If she wanted to smoke pot, she could damn well do that the right way too.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title from the Daughter song "Touch."

Nancy leaned against the rail of the bridge, heart beating uncontrollably fast. She hated being out after dark, even this far away from the woods, but tonight it was unavoidable. Her mother would kill her if she caught her doing this in the house.

Monsters are nothing compared to my mom when she's worried, she thought, even though she knew it wasn't true. Even if her mother had known what had happened last fall, she wouldn't have been able to put a stop to it.

These days when ladies at church told Nancy she was just like her mom, she had the strangest urge to laugh.

Her mother sure as hell wouldn't be here, standing on a bridge at night trying to get a lighter to work. She flicked it again. Her thumbnail scratched on the ridges, threatening to tear. Nancy knew that by the time she got this, the nail would be completely ragged. It was the sort of thing she would have cared a lot about four months ago.

"I can help you with that," a voice said from behind her.

Nancy flinched so hard that the joint fell from between her fingers and onto the bridge. "You scared me," she said, turning to face Jonathan Byers.

"Sorry. I tried to think of a way to say I was here that wouldn't freak you out, but it didn't seem like there was one." He gave a half-shrug, shoulders high like they were when he was uncomfortable. Nancy didn't know how she knew this, but she did.

She knelt on the ground and felt around. At least the joint hadn't fallen into the pond.

"Oh, here," Jonathan said, shining his flashlight on the ground by her

feet.

Nancy retrieved the joint and stood, trying not to look guilty. "What are you doing here?"

"Needed to get out of the house." Jonathan looked away. "Sometimes I think I can still see it coming out of the walls. So then I leave, and I feel terrible for leaving my mom and Will with it because if it was really there, they'd need my help, so I go back. It's stupid."

"I don't think that's stupid," Nancy said softly.

He shrugged again. "So, I didn't think you were the type to smoke pot," he said, nodding his head at the joint.

"Steve gave it to me." She looked down "He said it might help me sleep."

"He didn't want to come out here and show you how to smoke it?"

"We broke up last week," Nancy said. She said the words quickly, hoping they wouldn't leave a rotten taste in her mouth. It didn't work.

Jonathan nodded. "Okay."

The taste continued to build. If she'd been a boy, or if girls like her were allowed to do that sort of thing, she'd have spat over the edge of the railing. "Don't you want to know why?"

"I don't know. Are you okay with telling me?"

"He couldn't handle being in a relationship with someone who kept waking up screaming in the middle of the night." Or having to hide under the bed when her mom came in to check on her, or the fact that no matter how much he held her and said she'd be okay, she never managed to get back to sleep after the first nightmare of the night.

She'd told him he could stop coming. He'd said he wasn't that kind of guy, the one who would let his girlfriend be alone when she needed him.

If he'd been that kind of guy, they might have managed to stay together.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said. He sounded like he meant it.

"You don't have to be." She tried to laugh. It came out sounding brittle and sharp. "I mean, after everything that happened a breakup's a pretty silly thing to get worked up about, right?"

"I guess so." He set his flashlight down on the railing. "You know, my offer to light that's still good."

"I feel like an idiot, but okay." Nancy handed over the lighter. Their fingers brushed as he took it, sending her reeling back to the day they'd cut their hands. She forced the thought back, imagining it moving into a box, then picturing herself locking the box and throwing away the key. She'd forget the entirety of that week if she could. Nothing of importance had happened in November of 1983. Nothing she couldn't forget if she tried hard enough.

The lighter caught on Jonathan's first try. He held it out to her. Nancy lit the joint, then held it to her lips. She wanted this to be over, so she could go home and get into bed. Maybe Steve was right, and this would mean she could sleep tonight.

Nancy inhaled as hard as she could, then coughed as she let it out.

"Breathe in more gently but for longer," Jonathan said. "It won't hurt as much."

"Show me," she said, because Nancy Wheeler was a girl who did things right. If she wanted to do well in school, she'd do well in school. If she wanted to fight a monster, she'd fight a monster. If she wanted to smoke pot, she could damn well do that the right way too.

She handed Jonathan the joint. He took it and held it to his lips, sucking in air for several seconds before he stopped. He held it in for a moment, then exhaled. Nancy watched the smoke brush past his lips and out into the night sky.

"Now you try," he said, handing it back.

Nancy tore her eyes from his lips and took the joint. This time, it was easier to draw the smoke into her mouth and exhale. It didn't hurt. It didn't feel like anything.

She didn't look to see if Jonathan was watching. When she stopped to think about it, she knew he would be.

They passed the joint back and forth several times. Nancy grew used to the way the smoke sat on her tongue, the weight of it before she exhaled. Before too long, there was too little to hold. She let it burn her fingertips for a moment, then crushed it against the bridge railing.

Jonathan looked at her. "Feel any different?"

"It doesn't really feel like anything," she admitted.

"Most people don't get high their first time," Jonathan said. "I didn't until my fourth, I think."

"Do you do it a lot?"

"Less now that my dad's gone."

Nancy nodded. She wanted to find Steve, to slap him and tell him it hadn't worked. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and pretend nothing had changed. *Idiot*, she told herself. Barb was gone. The world was full of monsters. And she'd thought what, that a little bit of pot would make it all go away? It wasn't Steve's fault that November was proving impossible to forget.

She wondered tiredly which dream she would have tonight. She hoped it would be one with Barb in it. Nancy preferred those to the ones with the monster, even if she did wake up screaming from them an equal amount of the time. But if she was going to scream and feel awful, she might as well get to see her best friend for a little while.

"Let's just go home."

"Are you okay?" Jonathan asked, because he was Jonathan, and of course he had to ask the difficult questions.

Nancy squeezed her eyes shut. "I just thought it would feel different," she said. She swallowed hard, determined not to cry. "I wanted it to make me different."

"I know," Jonathan said softly. He touched her back. "Come on. I'll walk you home."

2. Chapter 2

A week later, Nancy was waiting next to his car after school. Jonathan forced himself to breathe regularly, hating the way his heart raced out of control every time he saw her when he wasn't expecting to. *Nothing bad's happened*, he told himself, wishing he believed it.

"Is everyone okay?" he demanded when he reached her. "No monsters or anything?" It was supposed to sound like a joke, but it didn't. Then again, it hadn't been one.

Nancy ignored his questions and crossed her arms. "I want to try again," she said. There was that glint in her eye, the one she'd had in November when she shot that can on her first try. "I want to get it right this time."

Jonathan looked at her for a moment, his heart rate slowing almost back to normal. He wondered if it was worth telling her that smoking pot wasn't the sort of thing you tried to get right, like school or something. But within the cage of her arms, Nancy's hands were shaking. He wondered if she knew he noticed these things.

"Do you need me to get some?" he asked, thinking quickly. There was still that guy who sold before school in the parking lot, and if he pulled an extra shift that weekend—

"It's okay," Nancy said. "Steve told me he can keep getting it for as long as I need it."

Jonathan nodded. The pang that went through him when she brought up Steve was so familiar he almost didn't notice it. "All right. My mom and Will are out Thursday, if you want to be indoors."

"No." Nancy's arms uncrossed and flew to her side. Her hands balled into fists, but they were still shaking. "Tonight. It has to be tonight. I can't handle—I just really need to sleep tonight. Could you meet me by the bridge again? I think I can get away around nine if I leave my light on. My mom will think I'm just in my room."

His chest tightened. Girls like Nancy were supposed to do things like sneak out, but not for reasons like this. "Okay. Nine tonight, then."

"Thank you." Nancy smiled tightly, then turned to leave. She moved quickly, as if she was nervous something would happen if she stayed still for too long. Jonathan watched her walk away. It wasn't until she was out of sight that he realized if he stuck around any longer, he'd be late for work.

When his shift ended Jonathan went home for a late dinner, then pulled on his warmest jacket and told his mom he was going out to meet Nancy. "I don't think I'll be gone for more than a few hours." He hated being this vague, but any amount of time he named could turn out to be a lie, and he wouldn't do that, not after Will.

She nodded. "Call me if you're out later than eleven. I don't care if you're out in the middle of nowhere, find a pay phone and let me know you're safe. Got it?"

"Got it."

His mom hugged him, as she'd become prone to doing in the past few months. "Be safe," she whispered before letting go.

Jonathan hugged back, then walked out of the house and down the road toward the bridge. When he got there, Nancy was already waiting for him. She had her own flashlight this time, and was sitting cross-legged on the bridge, staring at nothing.

"Hey," he said, sitting down next to her.

Nancy kept her face towards the ground. "Hi," she said quietly, handing him the lighter and a joint without another word. The dim light of the flashlight made the circles under her eyes look even deeper.

Jonathan lit the joint and took the first hit, inhaling until he was sure it wouldn't go out. When he'd finished, he held it out for her to take. Nancy grabbed it without saying a word, breathing in as though she were drowning. There had to be a better way to do this, a better way to make themselves feel okay again, but Jonathan didn't know what

it was.

He wondered what Will and his friends were doing to cope with everything. Was it easier or harder, being that young? Sometimes when Jonathan picked Will up from a ten hour D&D session, he seemed so normal that Jonathan wondered if the past few months had been some sort of hallucination. But there had to be more that he didn't know. They all had their traumas. He just hoped that however Will was healing, it was healthier than this.

"I don't think I'm doing it right," Nancy said. She sounded angry as she handed the joint back over. "Show me how again."

He complied, holding the smoke in as long as he could before releasing it.

"Okay, now walk me through it."

Jonathan went through it step by step, telling her how long to inhale and when to let it out. Nancy followed his directions, a look of fierce concentration on her face. A strand of hair had fallen out of her ponytail, and he wanted to push it back, but decided that would be going too far.

She handed him the joint again. It occurred to him that this object had touched both of their lips, and that in a way that was kissing.

Careful, Byers, he told himself, knowing this was a stoned way to be thinking. He couldn't let himself get too high, not when he was supposed to be helping Nancy through this. He passed the joint back.

Once Will had gotten out of the hospital, their mom had taken him to see a therapist. Jonathan had warned her that no mental health specialist out there would believe a word they said, but she'd done it anyway. There'd only been one session, after which the therapist had taken Joyce aside and told her that Will was a pathological liar. She'd cussed him out good, and that was the end of the whole therapy thing.

Sometimes, Jonathan hated being right.

Nancy took several hits in a row. In between them she was silent, her

breathing ragged. If Jonathan hadn't been looking at her, he might have thought she was crying.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Her forehead creased with concentration. "What is it supposed to feel like?"

Jonathan hesitated for a moment, words seeming to escape him. "I think you'll know when it happens," he said finally. His thoughts were still halfway on Will, but he forced himself to focus. "Um, you'll feel really relaxed. And you'll start saying things just because you feel like saying them. Sometimes you feel connected to the things around you, or funny things will be funnier. And sensations will feel different. Once I got stoned and spent twenty minutes rubbing my fingers together because I couldn't believe how rough they felt."

Nancy made a frustrated sound. "I'm not getting anything like that!"

"Hey," Jonathan said. He touched her hand. It was soft, and he hated that he noticed that when he was supposed to be helping her. "It's okay. You'll get there. You just need to relax a bit."

"If I could relax, I wouldn't be sitting here with you smoking pot!"

Without letting himself think about it, Jonathan relaxed his fingers until they were intertwined with hers. "It's okay," he repeated, squeezing her hand once and then letting go.

"Are you experiencing it?" she asked, sounding desperate.

"A little." He almost laughed, but he didn't want her to get the wrong idea. There was nothing funny about the situation except that it was so unexpected. Jonathan had never thought he'd be out here with Nancy Wheeler in the dark while she demanded to know if he was more stoned than her.

"It was supposed to work this time," she said, digging her nails into her jeans. "Why didn't it work?"

"Give it time."

"The monster was in my closet last night," Nancy whispered. She blinked hard, as though she were trying not to cry. "That was what the nightmare was. I heard someone crying, so I went to open the door. I thought it was Barb. Have you ever had that, where you know you're dreaming? I knew I was dreaming, and I thought I'd see Barb. So I opened the door, and it jumped out at me—I couldn't make myself wake up. I knew I was dreaming, but I couldn't wake up."

Jonathan's skin felt too tight. He picked up her hand and traced the scar that they shared "It was Will," he told her after a moment. "For me, I mean. I dreamed he was making the lights flicker, like he did for mom. I smashed every damn light in the house trying to let him out."

"This isn't right!" Nancy said furiously. "We're seventeen. We're supposed to be worried about tests and college applications and stupid teenage drama! We shouldn't be having nightmares about monsters and brothers and—and—"

She stopped talking abruptly and returned the joint to her lips, sucking in air so quickly that it hurt to look at. The joint was burning so low at this point that Jonathan knew in a moment she'd burn her fingers. He gently took it away from her and put it out on the ground.

"It's not fair," Nancy said again, more quietly. There were tears in her eyes. She took his hand, and for several minutes, they sat there in silence. Jonathan wanted to say something comforting, or hell, to hold her, but he couldn't think of anything that would help.

"You know, Thursday's just a couple of days away," he said finally. "Get Steve to give you a couple of joints, we'll keep going until you're as high as you want, okay? We can listen to music or something. And you won't have the added stress of worrying someone will walk by and see. It'll help."

Nancy gripped his hand so tightly it hurt. "Do you promise?"

"I promise," he said, but there was a crawling sensation under his skin that suggested that maybe it wasn't true. Suddenly he was picturing an endless string of evenings in which she remained painfully sober, no matter how much they smoked. "You know that if

you have trouble sleeping, you can call me, right?” he asked, the words falling over themselves on the way out of his mouth. “My mom won’t mind. She knows—she knows what it feels like for us. So tonight, or tomorrow, if you can’t wait until Thursday, just call me, okay?”

Nancy nodded, but Jonathan already knew she wouldn’t call. She’d made the same offer months ago, and he’d never taken her up on it either. He’d meant to, but there was a difference between meaning to do something and actually doing it, especially in the depths of night when the monsters came out to play.

“Thursday,” he said again, as if it were a lifeline he were offering her, and maybe it was. All Jonathan knew was that if there was a chance he could save Nancy Wheeler, he’d do whatever it took to make it happen.

“Thursday,” Nancy repeated, the word sounding as though it might crumble to bits on her tongue. After a moment, she smiled. “I’ll walk you home this time.”

3. Chapter 3

It was five o'clock, and Nancy was in the Byers kitchen, looking out the window and waiting for Jonathan to come back with the record player. She flicked the lighter with her thumb, watching the flame for a moment letting go. She'd been practicing.

They'd meant to smoke in his room, but as soon as Nancy had gotten to the house, she realized that was out. The problem was the ghosts. The house felt full of them. The ghost of the monster was in the hallway, and in the living room, but there were others. There was the ghost of Joyce on the couch. Nancy could *see* her, clinging to a ball of Christmas lights and sobbing. She didn't even both to go into Jonathan's room. Her own ghost would be there, waiting for the monster from here to eternity.

She didn't know how Jonathan could sleep in that room.

After a moment, Jonathan re-entered the room. He set the record player gently on the table, then began to set it up. There was a pile of records that he set next to it.

"I, um, didn't know what you liked listening to, so I brought a couple of options."

Nancy didn't even look at them. "Play me something you like."

Jonathan seemed to think for a moment, then put one of the records on and dropped the needle. "I think you'll like this one," he said. "It's one of my mom's favorites."

Nancy was barely listening. As soon as Jonathan sat down, she lit the joint, a wave of relief washing over her as she managed to do it herself.. She was three hits in before she remembered that she was supposed to be sharing. She passed it over.

"You don't have to," he said.

Nancy shook her head. "It's going to be weird if I do it and you don't." She looked in his eyes, then looked away. "Anyway, Steve

gave me five of them. I doubt we'll get through more than that between the two of us."

Twenty minutes later, Nancy was dancing along to the music in her chair. The music was open to rid the room of smoke, and the cold air kept washing over her skin in a way that made her feel beautiful. She watched Jonathan as he put the joint between his lips and took the last hit. They were nice lips, she decided. Very good at smoking. Nancy wondered how she'd gone this long without noticing them.

"That's probably enough for now," Jonathan said. He put out the joint in the ash tray, next to the end of the first one they'd smoke. "If you're not feeling anything, we can wait twenty minutes and try again."

Nancy nodded. She still couldn't stop staring at his lips. She reached up, about to touch them, but stopped herself. "Sorry," she said with a laugh.

Jonathan did that thing where he looked like he was trying to stop himself from smiling. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

It took a moment for Nancy to realize what he was asking, but when he did she laughed again, delighted as she took in the way her body felt. "It worked this time!" she said, clapping her hands like Holly did when she was excited. She threw her arms around Jonathan's neck. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, returning the hug a moment too late.

When they'd separated, Nancy couldn't stop smiling. She drummed her fingers on the table, trying to follow the beat of the music. "What band is this?" she asked.

"The Runaways. Do you like them?"

"Definitely."

Jonathan's lips quirked upward into a smile. "I'll have to remember that if I ever make you a mix tape."

"Yes. You will."

“Hey, are you hungry?” Jonathan asked, getting up and going to the fridge.

Nancy nodded, then realized he couldn’t see her from his angle. “Yeah.”

Jonathan rooted around for a moment, then came out with a large Tupperware. “How do you feel about leftover spaghetti? We’d have to eat it cold, but it’s from yesterday so it should still be okay.”

“Sold,” Nancy said, then laughed. Jonathan handed her a fork and they ate right out of the Tupperware. Cold leftovers were a rarity in her house. Her mom always insisted that it wasn’t a meal if no one bothered to heat it up, which was really a damn shame because as it turned out, cold spaghetti was *awesome*.

“Why isn’t it like this all the time?” she asked, digging her fork into the noodles and jamming some into her mouth.

Jonathan leaned back in his chair. “It’d make school and work a lot harder.”

“What?”

“Well, it’s hard to concentrate when you’re high. There’d be a lot more accidents.”

“I wasn’t talking about being high. I was asking, why aren’t things between us like this all the time? We fought monsters together. Shouldn’t we be close?” It wasn’t until the words were out of her mouth that she realized this is the sort of question she wouldn’t ask while sober.

“I think maybe it’s more complicated than that.” Jonathan took several bits of pasta before speaking again. “Anyway, you’re the one who backed off first.” He didn’t say this angrily, more like he was just stating a fact.

Had she backed off? She’d left first, at the hospital, but Nancy wasn’t sure that counted. And then there’d been school, and the things they weren’t supposed to talk about. Everything was supposed to go back to normal. That had been the deal.

“We could try to be close,” she said. She took the last bite of spaghetti and shoved it in her mouth. It tasted better than anything had for a long time. “We could be best friends. It’s not like anybody else is ever going to get what we’ve been through, right?”

“If you want.” The half-smile was back. “Maybe you should wait until you’re sober to make that kind of life decision, though. Best friend’s an important job. I’m not sure I have what it takes to fill the role.”

“Nuh uh. I like you. *And* I like being stoned.”

She didn’t know why Jonathan laughed at this. She was being *serious*. This was the best she’d felt in months. Nancy had never understood the people who smoke pot behind the gym before school, but now—

Oh, shit.

Nancy could *feel* her eyes widening at the realization. It felt weird. “What if I can’t stop?” she asked. Nausea rose in her throat. She shouldn’t have eaten that much pasta that quickly. “What if this does help me sleep, and I can’t make myself stop doing it? I could end up as one of those people who throw away their whole lives trying to feel numb.”

Jonathan took a moment to answer. “The reason my mom and Will aren’t home is because Hop took them out to the woods to practice self-defense,” he said finally. “They do it every Thursday.”

This, in Nancy’s opinion, had nothing to do with anything. It certainly did nothing to slow her heart rate, which had just sped up like—oh she didn’t know, like a jackhammer or something. “Jonathan, this is serious. In biology last year we looked at pictures of what people’s lungs are like when they smoke too much. I don’t want to have those lungs.”

“They’re gone *every* Thursday,” he repeated. “And I almost never work Thursdays. Even when I’m scheduled, there’s this guy who always trades his shifts so he can get weekends off.”

This still didn’t make any sense. She told him that.

“We can smoke here,” Jonathan said, as though it solved the

problem. “On Thursdays, I mean.”

“I wasn’t worried about where we would smoke.”

“*Only* on Thursdays. That’s how you can keep from doing it too much. We’ll make a pact. The rest of the week, we’re clean, but on Thursdays you can come over and get high. Open invitation.”

Nancy considered this. One night a week. She could come up with something to tell her mom, some sort of standing commitment. Even if it didn’t help her sleep, she’d have Jonathan’s presence; the music he played and the feeling of being around someone she didn’t have to explain herself to.

“Okay.”

They listened to music and talked for a while longer. Around 8:30, Jonathan told her that his mom and Will would be home in an hour.

“Not that you’re not welcome to stay once they’re here!” he said quickly. “I just thought that maybe if you were using the pot to help sleep, it’d be a good idea to smoke another joint before you went home, and that’d mean doing it now and I just—I didn’t think you’d want to be stoned around my mom.”

Nancy shuddered. “Definitely not.”

This time around, she could track the sensations as they developed. There was the calm, which she’d known to expect, laced with something like giddiness. It wasn’t happiness, but then, that would have been too much to hope for. Jonathan had put on a new album, and she could feel it in her body. Then there was the—

Nope. Not going there.

“Is everything okay?” Jonathan asked after a little while. She didn’t know how long. Time was either frozen or moving quickly, she wasn’t sure which. “You’re kind of—staring at me.”

“It’s your hair,” she told him. It hadn’t been, but now that she thought about it, his hair was as good a reason as any to be staring at him. “Steve’s is always so—I don’t know, crunchy or something. I was

wondering what yours would feel like. Shit, I'm sorry, is that weird?"

"It's okay," Jonathan said, laughing. "You can touch my hair if you want to."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

Nancy leaned forward and threads both hands through his hair. It was *nice*. She giggled, then leaned forward so hard that she almost fell off her chair. Jonathan caught her, hands falling around her waist.

"You okay?" he asked, steadying her.

"Yeah," Nancy said breathlessly. She scooted her hair closer so that she wouldn't fall again, then resumed running her fingers through his hair. It was the softest thing she had ever felt, or maybe it just seemed that way because of the pot. (Nancy wasn't stupid, she knew that not everything she felt now could be explained sober.) She slowed her movement, savoring the feeling, and could hear Jonathan's breath hitch. Somehow, that made it even better, the way that the pot and the cold spaghetti and and being here and not at her own house had combined to give this evening sharp edges, making it real in a way that nothing had been since November.

Nancy watched her hands roam through Jonathan's hair before turning to see his face. His pupils were huge (was that because of the pot? She couldn't remember if pot was supposed to do that) and he was staring at her. A warm feeling spread throughout Nancy's body, bringing along with it a tightness in her chest. She remembered at once how easy it was to get cut on sharp edges, especially if you were careless.

She pulled away.

"I should go."

Jonathan stared at her for a moment longer, then nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

Nancy got to her feet, feeling suddenly heavy. She'd have to walk home, she realized. Even if Jonathan offered to drive her, he wouldn't be sober enough to do it for another few hours, and then she'd be sober too and it wouldn't help her sleep. Besides, if she waited much longer her parents would worry. She'd said she was going to Jonathan's and would probably stay for dinner, but they wouldn't like it if she was out much later on a school night.

"I'll see you tomorrow at school," she said, but made no move to leave.

"It's going to be cold tonight," Jonathan said.

Nancy looked at her jacket, hung over the edge of her chair. It looked small.

Jonathan's eyes followed hers, and he took off his flannel. "Here," he said pulling it over her shoulders. Nancy slid her arms into the sleeves. "Call me when you get home safe, okay?"

Nancy nodded, rubbing the coarse fabric of the shirt between her fingers before pulling her jacket on over it. For a moment, she almost asked him to come with her, but it didn't seem fair. Then he would have to walk home alone. *There's no monsters in the woods anymore*, she told herself.

Even so, she took the long way back to her house, staying as far from the edge of the forest as she could.

4. Chapter 4

There was a loud knock on the door.

Jonathan tensed, electricity flooding his body, and cast around for a weapon. All he came up with was a flashlight, but he picked it up and gripped it in one hand as he approached the door.

“Who is it?” he called.

Nancy’s voice came clearly through the door. “It’s me.”

Jonathan relaxed his hold on the flashlight and opened the door. “I thought I was coming to pick you up in a little while,” he said.

“Change of plan.” There was an edge in Nancy’s voice, as though something sharp were lodged in her throat.

He stepped away from the door and let her into the house. “Do you want to go to the—” *kitchen*, he’d been about to say, but Nancy had already walked around the coffee table and sat down on the couch.

Whatever was in her voice, it looked like it had flooded her entire body. Jonathan had never realized Nancy Wheeler was so full of angles. She was sitting rod straight, hands gripping her knees as she stared across the room.

“Is everything okay?” he asked, tentatively crossing the room to sit next to her.

“Tell me the good things that happened here,” she ordered, not looking at him. “I’m just—I’m tired of being scared of everything. I don’t want there to be places I can’t go.”

Whatever was going on, Jonathan got the feeling he wouldn’t find out what it was just by asking. He cleared his throat and looked around the room, then pointed. “Well, over there’s where Will worked on his fifth grade science project. He spent months working on it. Every time he thought he’d done it well enough, one of his friends would come up with an even cooler idea and he’d start over. I don’t think science was ever really his thing, he just wanted to keep

up with the others.”

“What else?”

Her eyes looked so empty that Jonathan had to look away. He swallowed hard and cast around in his mind. “Well, when my dad was still here, my mom would come here on bad nights and sleep on the couch. I could hear her leaving from my room, so sometimes I came out and made her hot chocolate. I’m sure it was terrible, but she always hugged me and told me she loved me.”

Nancy nodded. Her hands had unclenched slightly. “What else?”

Jonathan turned over his hand so that the scar was face up, something inside of him needing to remind her that they were on the same side. “We fought a monster in here,” he told her, heart speeding up he let the memory surface. “We lured it in and we shot it and we came pretty damn close to destroying it. We bought my mom enough time to save Will.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

He closed his eyes tightly for a second. “I know.”

“We’ll do the hall next,” Nancy said, already standing and making her way towards it.

“You want me to think of positive memories about with the hallway?”

“*You* don’t have to do anything,” Nancy said, wheeling to face him with her arms crossed over her chest. “But I’m going to sit in this hallway until I’m not scared anymore.”

Jonathan stared at her for a moment, then followed her. He sat down next to her, closing his eyes, then realized it was better to keep them open. The hall looked different than it had back then. If he kept his eyes open, he could see the lack of Christmas lights, the new carpet, the fact that there *wasn’t a monster there*.

The space still felt the same, but it wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

"I wanted to kill it," Nancy said after a moment, her voice softer than it had been. She looked down at her feet. "I just think I'd feel better now if we'd been the ones to kill it, you know?"

He nodded. Jonathan's own thoughts had been a constant loop of *what if it comes back, what if the monster comes and Eleven doesn't, how the hell are we going to get lucky enough to beat this things a second time* since the moment he'd seen Will lying on that hospital bed. He'd thought it would go away eventually.

Jonathan was still holding out hope the eventually was right around the corner.

"And nobody ever wants to talk about it. Sometimes it feels like everyone in the universe wants to pretend it never happened, like it'll just go away or something."

"You can talk to me about it."

"I know."

Jonathan stared at the lightbulb until it hurt his eyes and he had to look away. It didn't flicker, so he knew he was awake. It was hard to tell, sometimes. His heart was beating too quickly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent this long in the hallway, but it was probably Before.

"Is it getting easier?" he asked, hoping her answer was yes so they could just go to the kitchen or something. Being here was—Jonathan didn't know what it was. But he didn't like it.. "You said you were going to sit here until you weren't scared anymore."

"No. It's not." Nancy clenched her fists so tightly that Jonathan was sure her nails had pierced the skin.

He took a deep breath. "Nancy, what the hell happened today?" He couldn't look at her while he waited for the answer. It seemed to take a long time before she said anything.

"I told Barb's parents the truth."

"All of it?"

Nancy's mouth was a firm line. "All of it. About the Upside-Down and everything. They deserved to know the truth."

Jonathan nodded. He couldn't figure out what he should do with his hands. "Did they, um, did they believe you?"

"Of course they didn't believe me." Everything in Nancy seemed to deflate for a second, leaving her looking small. "They kicked me out of the house and told me to stop spreading lies about their daughter. I'm pretty sure I heard them calling my mom when I was leaving."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Looks like I won't be allowed back there for any more condolence visits."

Jonathan didn't know what to say to that. "You know, I do have one positive memory of this hallway," he said. "Besides lighting a monster on fire, I mean."

"Yeah?" Nancy stared at her legs. "What was it?"

"It happened right after my dad left. Will wasn't sleeping very well, but he didn't want anyone to stay in his room with him, so I dragged my sleeping bag out into the hall so that I could be nearby if he had a nightmare." Now that he was thinking about it, Jonathan could almost see his younger self there, lying with one ear next to Will's door so he could hear if anything happened. "There was one night when he came out to get water in the middle of the night, and he tripped over me, and Mom heard it so she came to see what was going on."

"Did she know you'd been sleeping there?"

Jonathan shook his head. "But she took one look at us and said that maybe we should all bring out our sleeping bags and have a slumber party. She let us eat junk food and stay up late playing music. I think she knew how hard those first few weeks were."

Nancy smiled for the first time that afternoon. "Your mom is so cool."

"She's a pretty big fan of yours, too. She said that any girl brave

enough to go looking for a monster is a girl I should be spending more time with.”

“Does that mean if Carol starts searching for Demigorgons you’re going to ditch me for her?”

“Oh, definitely,” Jonathan said, trying to keep from laughing. “We already have plans to fight a hydra this afternoon.”

Nancy looked at him. “Do you remember what I said last week? About wanting you to be my best friend?”

Jonathan nodded.

“I meant it. You’re the only person who—I feel more real when I’m with you.”

“You sure you want to make that step down the social ladder?” It was only after the words were out of his mouth that Jonathan realized maybe this was a joke that he shouldn’t be making. Sure enough, Nancy scowled at him.

“I’m tired of doing things that don’t matter.”

“Okay.”

“You’d better sit with me tomorrow at lunch,” she told him. “I don’t care if you think it’ll lower my social standing or whatever, I want to see you”

“I’ll be there.”

They sat there for a while longer. The hallway seemed to grow smaller, then larger and then small again. Jonathan wondered how long they’d have to sit there before Nancy decided she wasn’t scared anymore. He’d been living in this house for months and hadn’t gotten there, but then, there were times when he was sure that Nancy was better at this whole healing thing than he was.

“I hate this,” Nancy said, digging her toe into the carpet. “Did you know, I slept perfectly last time we smoked? It worked, just like Steve said it would. And then all week, I kept thinking of how much I

wanted to smoke to help me sleep, and then I thought about our promise, and I didn't do it."

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said, because he couldn't think of anything else.

Nancy looked at him, and he realized she was crying. He wondered how long this had been going on without him noticing. "I don't want you to be sorry," she told him, angrily wiping her eyes. "Everyone's always sorry."

"I didn't mean—"

"Please don't. I just—I need to be around someone who doesn't look at me like I'm about to fall apart. Everyone thinks I'm weak, or I can't handle everything that's happened. Even Mike gets weird with me sometimes I hate it."

"You're not," Jonathan said. "Weak, I mean. I was there. I saw you fight it." He hesitated, then put an arm around her shoulder.

"I'm tired of being strong," she told him, leaning her head against his chest. "I'd rather have Barb back."

They sat like that for a long time. Jonathan was aware of every place where their bodies were in contact, but he was equally aware of his pulse, of the way both of their eyes kept going towards the lights as though to check that they were still safe. There was that place on the floor from before, where a rug had been put down to cover the charred spot, and even with the rug, Jonathan was sure he could have pointed out exactly where the monster had stood.

Finally, Nancy stood and extended a hand. Jonathan let her pull him to his feet.

"Let's go to the kitchen," she said once she'd released his hand. "This pot's not going to smoke itself."

"Does this mean you're not scared anymore?" Jonathan asked. He could hear the desperate edge to his voice, but he hoped Nancy couldn't. Somehow, if she wasn't afraid it would make things better.

When she shook her head, Jonathan felt as though he might start crying.

"I'm tired of being brave," Nancy said, then turned on her heel and walked away.

She headed for the kitchen, hair falling neatly down her back. From this angle, she looked like a girl who had never gone through anything out of the ordinary brand of teenage woes. Like maybe circles under her eyes were nothing more than a trick of the light.

5. Chapter 5

A thin layer of smoke clouded the kitchen.

Nancy took one last hit before putting out the joint, holding the smoke in her lungs just past the point where it started to hurt. She coughed as she exhaled.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Should we light another one?”

“Do you want to?”

She thought about it. “Not really.” This hazy feeling was good, like she was on the edge of a cliff but refused to go off it.

“What now?” Jonathan asked. “There’s food, if you’re hungry.”

Nancy leaned her head back, neck falling against the back of the chair. She’d avoided the couch and the hallway this week, deciding she cared more about surviving than proving a point.

The edge of the chair dug into her neck. It almost managed to still feel comfortable. Her limbs were loose, and she twitched her fingers experimentally to see how they’d feel.

“Nancy?”

“Sorry.” She moved her head upright. “I’m tired today.”

“Worse than normal?”

She couldn’t remember what normal felt like. Yesterday felt as far away as four months ago, in a weird collapse of time. “Maybe. I think so.” Her tongue was thick in her mouth.

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

“Too tired to go home.”

“Okay.” Jonathan seemed to hesitate for a second, then said, “Do you want to take a nap?”

“Yes,” she said at once, then jolted upright, heart suddenly racing. “Wait. No. Not the couch. I can’t sleep there, not with— I can’t sleep there.”

“You could sleep on my bed,” Jonathan said quickly. He blushed. “By yourself, obviously. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make that sounds like I was—”

“You can sleep there too.” It wasn’t safe to be alone. The ghost of a monster might be just as bad as the monster itself. They’d hidden in that room, waiting for the yo-yo to move.

She didn’t want to be alone.

“What?”

“Come on. I know you haven’t been sleeping any better than I have. Let’s take a nap.” Nancy got to her feet and grabbed Jonathan by the hand, refusing to give herself time to think. She’d already learned how easy it was to think her way out of things, even while high. “Right now, before we get a second wind or anything.”

Jonathan allowed her to pull him to his feet, then led the way down the hall. Nancy tensed as they approached the door, but instead, Jonathan turned and opened a different one. “My room’s through here,” he said.

Nancy frowned, but followed him in and looked around. It took her a moment to realize that not only was this not the same place the door should have been, it was an entirely different room. She hadn’t been here before.

Where had they hid from the Demegorgon?

It must have been Will’s room, she realized. It felt wrong. All this time, when she’d pictured Jonathan at home, she’d imagined him in that room that wasn’t his.

How had she not realized this? There must have been incongruities—there hadn’t been a record player in that room, had there? Nancy closed her eyes, trying to picture the room where they’d hidden from the monster, but the whole night had a blurred sort of quality to it, as

though it were obscured by smoke. She couldn't remember a damn thing.

But she was here now, and there weren't any ghosts in this room, and all of a sudden the fatigue came back full-force.

Nancy pulled off her shoes and laid down on the bed. After a moment of hesitation, Jonathan joined her, dropping gently down next to her. She turned to look at him.

He was so far away.

"Can you come a little closer?" she asked him. Everything in here felt slow and calm, like the baseline to a song that hadn't really picked up yet.

Jonathan shifted an inch or so toward her.

"No," Nancy told him, wrapping her arms around his neck and laying her head on his chest. "Like this."

She could feel Jonathan's body tense underneath her, then relax as he lifted up an arm and wrapped it around her back. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Nancy nodded against him, then let herself drift away.

*

When Nancy woke up, she wasn't sure where she was at first. Her body felt heavy, and her thoughts couldn't seem to pick up. The room was dark, but she could clearly make out Jonathan's shape, so distinct it looked like somebody had outlined it with a black marker. Their bodies were no longer in contact.

Jonathan was still asleep, his face only inches from her own. Nancy's stomach dropped as she mapped out his features, the distance between his eyes and his lips. She wanted—she didn't know what she wanted. But something. Definitely something.

What she did know was that the space between them wasn't empty.

There was some sort of energy there, like when Nancy was a kid and she'd kept trying to force magnets of the same polarity together. The closer they got, the more the tension rose.

Get a grip, she told herself. Any more of this and she'd be sounding like the shitty song lyrics in some of the bands Jonathan liked.

And then, just for a second, an image flashed into her mind of that music playing while she straddled Jonathan, her lips centimeters from his before he leaned up and—

Shit.

She was so screwed.

Before she and Steve had gotten together, Nancy had pictured kissing him the time. Once a teacher had had to call her name twice to get her attention because she'd been so wrapped up in the fantasies. Steve had been easy to want. He was cute and popular and yeah, so maybe she'd been rebelling in the same way every suburban girl rebelled, but she'd liked that too. It had felt safe.

Steve had never watched her cut her hand and seen the blood bubble up under the skin, or held her in the woods while she shook and sobbed. He'd seen the pretty girl, the smart girl, the girl who was easy to love.

He hadn't been there that night when Nancy's skin had felt so tight she was terrified the monster would come bursting out of it and swallow her whole.

She forced herself out of the bed, away from Jonathan and his lips and the things she couldn't afford to think about. Nancy pulled on her shoes and padded down the hallways, thinking maybe she could find some paper and leave a note telling him she'd left, when a sound in the living room stopped her.

"Jonathan?" a voice called. "Is that you?"

Nancy stepped into the room. "Hi, Mrs. Byers," she said, crossing her arms nervously. The reddish light of the lamps seemed hyper-saturated and she didn't know where to look.

“Oh, hi, Nancy!” Joyce said, jumping to her feet. “I didn’t know you were—I would have made something—actually, I’m sure there’s food in the fridge. Do you want anything, sweetie? I could make you a sandwich, anyway. Damn it, I knew I should have gone shopping this week.”

“A sandwich sounds great,” Nancy said, forcing herself not to look away. It wasn’t Joyce’s fault that everything inside of her had suddenly become chaotic. “Could I use your phone maybe? I didn’t mean to stay here this long, I should probably let my parents know I’m okay.”

“Of course! Do you know if Jonathan’s eaten yet? Hopper took me and Will out to dinner, but the two of you could eat together.”

“I don’t think he’s eaten, no,” Nancy said, shaking her head. She had the feeling she always got when she left a movie theater when it was still light out, but in reverse. She kept picking up on tiny details, like the way Joyce’s hands shook as she put out her cigarette and the sound of feet on the carpet and—

Shit, she was still a little bit high, wasn’t she?

Luckily, Joyce didn’t seem to have noticed anything. “I’ll make one for him too, then. Could you get him after you’re done with your call? He doesn’t like me going into his room lately, but I want to be sure he’s eating okay.”

“I’ll make sure he does,” Nancy promised.

“Good. Good. I’ll just go—” Joyce gestured towards the kitchen. “And you can call your parents.”

Nancy nodded, and followed Joyce into the hallway. She dialed the number, then closed her eyes, trying to force away thoughts of where she was standing. Last week had helped a little bit, but it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t ever going to be enough.

Her mom answered after the third ring. “Hello, this is Karen Wheeler, may I help you?”

“Hi Mom,” Nancy said. She wrapped the phone cord around her

finger. "It's Nancy."

"Where are you?" Her mother's voice contained a hint of panic, but she sounded as though she were trying to suppress it. "I tried calling you at the Byers' earlier but no one picked up."

"I'm sorry. We were at the library. I forgot to pay attention to the time."

"Nancy, we've *talked* about this. You need to remember to call me. Especially after—"

"I know," Nancy said sharply, cutting her mother off. She'd been about to—she couldn't talk about Barb. Not with her mom, anyway. Maybe not with anyone. "Anyway, I'm back at Jonathan's now, we're going to eat dinner and then I'll come right home, okay?"

"You haven't eaten yet?"

"We lost track of time!"

Her mom sighed. "Can you at least make sure you get Jonathan or Joyce to give you a ride home? I don't want you walking alone in the dark."

Nancy nodded, then remembered that her mother couldn't see her. "I will," she promised. "I'll see you later, all right?" She hung up before she could say something that would tip her mom off that she'd been lying.

She went back to Jonathan's room to wake him up and they ate in the kitchen together. When they were finished, he drove her home. He waited until she'd made it through the front door before driving away.

Nancy wished she could go back to not noticing things like that about him.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for waiting so long for this update! I thought I'd be able to finish this much sooner, but senior year of college ended up kicking my ass and I haven't had the energy to work on this until recently. Shout-out to wipweek on tumblr for helping me get it together enough to write this chapter! I'll try to have the ending up soon.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, and neither of them spoke. It had been weeks since they'd slept together in his bed, and in that time it had gone entirely unmentioned. Whenever he and Nancy talked, Jonathan pictured a layer of film between them, obscuring the things they couldn't mention.

A strand of hair fell in front of Nancy's face as she let the smoke drift slowly from her mouth. Their fingers brushed as she passed the joint, sending tingles through Jonathan's arms.

"Why are you still doing this?" he asked, breaking the silence for the first time since she had arrived today. He took a long hit and let it out slowly. "Sorry, that came out wrong." He wasn't sure what he'd meant to say, exactly, except that he was pretty sure that smoking pot was nowhere in the handbook of accepted forms of rebellion for suburban girls

"No, I know what you mean." Nancy took the joint back from him and played with it for a moment, then put it out against the ashtray. "We're not supposed to do anything that we wouldn't have done before, right? I'm breaking the rules right now. We're all supposed to act like nothing happened."

"That's not what I meant."

"Yeah, it is."

Jonathan looked down at his hands.

"I was doing everything right," Nancy said, closing her eyes. "I had the boyfriend everyone wanted. I could go to parties and still get perfect grades. I had everything under control. Things were going exactly how they were supposed to."

Her sentence ended abruptly. Jonathan waited for more, but it never came. "And?"

"And nothing. It didn't matter. The bad thing happened anyway."

"Oh."

Nancy's eyes snapped open, revealing a moment of vulnerability before her face returned to neutrality. "Yeah. So that's why. If things are going to suck anyway, I'm not going to bother trying to do things the right way anymore." She picked up the joint and relit it, taking the longest hit Jonathan had seen her do. After she exhaled, she passed it over.

Jonathan had almost brought it to his lips when Nancy spoke again.

"God, I wonder what Barb would think if she could see me right now."

"I didn't know her that well." He wished he had more to offer.

"I did. She'd say, 'Nancy, come *on*. You need to take better care of yourself. Just because I'm not around doesn't mean you can fall apart like this.' And then she'd make that face at me that she always did."

Jonathan took a deep breath. "You know, we don't have to—"

"I want to," Nancy said, taking the joint from his hands. "I want to fall apart like this. Barb's dead. She doesn't get to tell me the right way to deal."

He nodded.

"I have to be allowed to make bad choices." The words were soft, like she was begging for understanding or forgiveness. "Everyone tells me I'm handling things so well. You know, my mom said she was proud of me for keeping my grades up with everything that's happened."

“It is pretty amazing.”

Nancy took the last hit, and put out the joint. “I don’t want to be amazing anymore. Why is it my job to be okay?”

Jonathan’s tongue felt heavy in his mouth, and no words came out. His mind flickered to when his dad had left, how he’d smashed all of the records his father had ever given him and left the pieces on the floor for weeks until he’d finally sliced his foot on one and had to clean them up. He wanted to give Nancy something to break, a plate or a window or maybe his heart, and give her permission to smash it just to understand the feeling of destroying something.

“It’s not,” he finally told her. “But I think you’d be amazing even if you didn’t hold it together.”

She looked up, and Jonathan realized that this was the first time today that she had looked him in the eye. He held her gaze, ignoring the way he could feel his pulse pounding in his throat. The moment stretched on longer than it should have. Nancy’s eyes flicked down to his lips, and Jonathan licked them before realizing what he was doing.

The sound of rubber on gravel resonated in the background. Nancy’s eyes widened as she turned her head. “What was that?” she whispered.

The tension that had been building should have snapped at the moment their eyes parted, but it lingered in the air between them. Jonathan’s heart sped up. “Hopper’s car,” he said. “They must be back early.”

“Shit. Do you think—” Nancy turned towards him, eyes still wider than he’d seen them in months.

“My mom won’t care. But Hopper—I don’t know.”

“Do you think he’ll call my parents?”

He cast around the room, assessing the situation. The kitchen wasn’t very smoky, and the end of the joint probably looked enough like a cigarette butt not to raise any red flags, but he wasn’t sure if the

smell was all the way gone, and if Nancy's red eyes were anything to go by, neither of them looked entirely sober.

Shit.

The footsteps outside were getting louder. Jonathan could hear the sound of the doorknob turning. He looked at Nancy. "Any bright ideas?"

She looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded, eyes glinting. "I've got one," She said, rising from her seat and approaching him.

"Great, what is—"

There wasn't even time to finish his sentence before Nancy had straddled his lap, capturing his lips with hers. Jonathan's eyes fluttered shut. He put his hands on her waist to steady himself, feeling as though without her to anchor him he might topple right out of this chair. Nancy's lips were hot against his, closing around his bottom lip and sucking it. He shivered. Her hands were on his shoulders, then brushing against his neck. When Nancy's thumb reached his collarbone Jonathan gasped, and her tongue slipped into his mouth

"Jesus Christ!"

Jonathan's eyes were closed, but he could feel the absence of Nancy's body as she jerked away.

"Shit, sorry," she said, sounding almost as though she meant it. "We didn't think anyone else was home."

Jonathan opened his eyes and found himself staring directly at Hopper, who's eyebrows were furrowed.

"You'd better take this to your bedroom," he said after a long moment. "I don't imagine you want your little brother to see you like this."

"Right," Jonathan said at once. "I wouldn't—Nancy, do you want to go to—"

“Yes,” Nancy said, taking him firmly by the hand and leading him to his room. Once inside, she let go, slumped against the door, and closed her eyes. Jonathan stood next to her, unsure what to do with his hands.

“Sorry,” Nancy said after a moment. “I needed to distract him. Now if he notices we’re acting weird he’ll think it’s embarrassment.”

Jonathan cleared his throat. “It seems like it worked.”

“You think so?”

He nodded and sat down on the bed. There was a long silence before Nancy sat next to him. He expected her to avoid, avoid, change the subject because some things weren’t for talking about, but like always, she surprised him.

“Was that—had you ever kissed someone before?”

“No.” Jonathan’s tongue felt heavy in his mouth. He thought he could feel his lips still tingling, and reached up a hand to touch them. Instantly, he felt stupid for doing so.

He didn’t know the rules for situations like this, but he was sure he was supposed to pretend it hadn’t meant a thing.

“Was it okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course it was.”

“I should have asked first. I’m sorry, I just didn’t know what to do, and I was panicking and it was the first thing I thought of.”

“Nancy, it’s really okay.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it and nodded. “If you’re sure,” she said softly.

Jonathan’s mouth went dry, and he swallowed hard. He couldn’t remember if he and Nancy had ever sat this close together before—or did they always sit this close? They’d never kissed before, so he’d never thought about it so—

"I should go," Nancy said, turning her head away. "Shit, my bag's still in the kitchen."

"I'll get it for you," Jonathan found himself offering. He tore his eyes away from her lips. "I have more practice pretending not to be high than you do."

Nancy nodded. Jonathan made his way to the kitchen, trying to get his suddenly uneven breathing back under control. She'd kissed him. She'd *kissed* him.

He'd spent months thinking about it, but now it was real and it felt like a vice around his throat. His entire sense of stability depended on normalcy. Will and his friends played Dungeons and Dragons once a week, and Nancy went to school and got good grades, and Jonathan took pictures and pretended he didn't mind being on the outside. Thinking about kissing Nancy had been within the bounds of what was expected.

It's Thursday, he reminded himself. Their Thursdays were a break from the rules. Tomorrow it wouldn't mean anything.

It already didn't mean anything.

Hopper was sitting in the kitchen. "Nancy need a ride home?" he asked.

"I can take her. She just left her bag here."

"I'll drive her," Hopper said firmly.

"I can—"

"I said I would drive her."

Jonathan shoved his hands into his pockets and nodded. "I'll go get her."

He returned to the room with her purse. Nancy was still on the bed. He handed it to her, and she took it without looking at him.

"Hopper says he'll give you a ride home. It's probably better, I don't

know if I—”

“Okay.”

Nancy stood, and their eyes met. She stepped closer, and Jonathan’s heart sped up so much that he could feel his pulse in his fingertips. Nancy hesitated, looking for a moment as though she might lean in. Then her face closed off and she stepped around him, walked through the door and closed it so that Jonathan was left alone in his room.

Jonathan on his own, Jonathan on the outside while other people lived their lives. The world made sense again.

*

When Hopper returned to the house, he summoned Jonathan to the kitchen. Will was in the bathroom coughing, and their mom had gone out for groceries, so they were alone in the room.

“So,” Hopper said, sitting down across the table and opening a packet of cigarettes. “Do you trust your dealer not to lace what you’re smoking with anything else?”

“What?”

“Several times a year, we get a call from someone who’s OD’d on something that they didn’t think they were taking. So, do you trust your dealer or what?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Look, I don’t care that you’re smoking pot,” Hopper said, shaking his head slightly. “Especially Nancy. Hell, if I’d gone to that place when I was as young as the two of you, you can bet I’d have done any drugs I could have gotten my hands on. Not that you heard that from me. But I have a responsibility to your mother to make sure you’re at least doing it safely.”

“I don’t know who’s dealing,” Jonathan said. “Steve gives it to Nancy.”

Hopper shook a cigarette out of the packet. "All right. Steve wouldn't give Nancy anything that he thought would hurt her."

Jonathan nodded, watching as Hopper lit the cigarette. They sat in silence for a long moment before Hopper clapped him on the shoulder and went out to the porch.

Steve wouldn't give Nancy anything he thought would hurt her. But Steve had let Nancy go, let her break up with him and watched her walk away. And now Nancy was smoking pot and kissing Jonathan and some nights maybe she managed to get to sleep.

Jonathan touched his lips and took a deep breath. *Steve wouldn't give Nancy anything he thought would hurt her,* he repeated to himself, and he hoped to God it was true.

7. Chapter 7

The next Thursday Nancy showed up at Jonathan's house with a backpack over her shoulder, trembling hands, and a gun she'd taken from her father's bedside table.

The door swung open after only one knock, and Jonathan stood in front of her. He motioned for her to come inside, but she didn't. He looked down. "Are you coming in?"

Nancy crossed her arms in front of her chest, tucking her hands where they couldn't be seen. "No, you're coming out."

"Why?"

"We're going back there."

"Back where?"

She didn't bother to reply, just turned and walked off towards the woods. The absence of footsteps behind her almost made her heart stop, but after a moment he followed and soon caught up to her. Neither spoke. The sound of the wind in the trees was deafening.

They were deep into the woods when Nancy took the chance and glanced at Jonathan. When she saw him looking at her, she flinched and turned back towards the towering branches. The leaves swayed slightly and for a moment, so did Nancy.

She pulled the gun out from her backpack and held it steadily in front of her.

Jonathan stared at her for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice was higher than usual. "Do you—do you think we'll need that?"

"No." Still, Nancy kept the gun raised as they continued through the woods. Their footsteps seemed to echo through the forest. Every few seconds, Nancy turned her head to be sure they weren't being followed. Jonathan was stiller, but the energy emanating from him continued to rise, and she knew his heart must be racing just as fast as hers.

Time moved in circles, cascading around her and looping in and out of itself. Nancy had no idea how long they'd been walking when, out of nowhere, Jonathan's footsteps beside her ceased. She turned around to see what the holdup was, and saw that he'd stopped moving and was looking around at the trees.

"This is it."

Nancy walked back towards him, lowering the gun just enough that it wasn't pointed at him. "What do you mean?"

"It was here." Jonathan said.

"What was here?"

"The spot where you went through." He stared at her. "Isn't that what you were looking for?"

The silence between them lasted a little too long. Nancy nodded, tongue thick and heavy in her mouth. "Yeah," she said "Yeah, this is what I was looking for."

She walked around examining the trees, but none stood out to her. Memories from that night were etched into her brain like the scratches on her kitchen table, but the tree could have been any of them.

After a long moment, Nancy placed the gun back into her backpack, hoping Jonathan couldn't see her hands shake "I don't know why I thought I needed this," she said. "There hasn't been anything out here for months."

"I can still feel it though," Jonathan said. "Can't you?"

Nancy swallowed, mouth suddenly far too dry. "It's just the bad memories."

"Yeah, maybe."

Jonathan's tone made Nancy want to punch him in the face. What the hell did he know, anyway? He hadn't been to the upside-down. He didn't understand any of it. He was just a dumb guy who's stupid

brother had been kidnapped and hadn't even managed to die. This wasn't his story.

"It can't be anything else," Nancy snapped, balling her hands into fists. "It's gone. It doesn't have a way back in."

"What do we do if it comes back?"

Nancy's nails dug into her palm until she thought they'd break skin. She forced herself to let go. "We survive."

"And if we can't?"

"Then we die." The words were nails in her mouth. She refused to choke on them. People died all the damn time.

Jonathan shook his head. "No. I don't accept that."

"There's nothing to accept. You think Barb just accepted her death?"

"We can fight."

Nancy closed her eyes. "Fire and bullets weren't enough," she said. Waves of fatigue washed over her. If she'd been in bed right now, she might have been able to sleep. "I'm tired of lying to myself. If it comes again, it'll kill us." Maybe it would even be a relief. She tried to push the thought back in the way she'd grown used to, then stopped herself. There was no point in lying.

After a long time, Jonathan spoke. "Why the hell are we here, Nancy? What were you hoping would happen?"

Instead of speaking, Nancy unzipped her backpack and pulled out a picnic blanket, then laid it out carefully before sitting down on it. She pulled a plastic bag out of the front pocket.

"Thursday afternoon," she reminded him.

He stared for a moment, then sat down next to her, legs splayed out awkwardly. "If I smoke with you will you stop pointing out the likelihood that we'll die at any given moment?"

“No promises,” Nancy said, lighting the joint.

Jonathan said nothing, but she could feel his eyes on her as she slowly exhaled and let the smoke drift out towards the trees. She passed the joint.

As she smoked, the high entered her body in waves. Nancy had finally learned to identify the different phases of stoned, to reach the exact point she wanted to hit and then stop. The trees wavered around them, and by the time the second joint was done, they were different trees. They were indifferent trees. They weren’t kind but they meant no harm, not like they had before.

She was lying on her side next to Jonathan as he took the last hit. After he exhaled, he rolled over onto his side facing her. Memory tightened around her like clothes that had shrunk in the wash. Nancy couldn’t tell whether or not she was breathing.

“How have you been?” Jonathan asked, as though his thoughts had been roaming the same trails as her own.

“Fine.”

He looked at her closely. “No, I mean how have you *really* been?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

Half a smile formed on his face. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it? I guess I just wanted to know—I keep feeling like we must be feeling the same way, but I don’t want to assume—”

“Please shut up.”

“Okay.”

Nancy sat up to avoid looking at Jonathan, but he mirrored her motion and then they were sitting next to each other, the same way they had earlier. Before Nancy knew what was happening, their eyes had met again. Hers flicked down to his lips.

She hadn’t paid enough attention, when she’d kissed him last week. She’d acted impulsively, her only concern avoiding being found out.

It wasn't until after she'd pulled away that Nancy had realized how much she'd enjoyed it.

In the present, she leaned towards him, and after only a second of hesitation, he leaned in as well. They locked eyes for a moment before Nancy reached up a hand and stroked his face. Jonathan closed his eyes, moving with her hand like a cat being touched.

"You're cold," she said.

"I know."

Her hand felt strange at the end of her wrist, as though it didn't belong to her. She let her thumb run along Jonathan's jawbone, then leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. Her stomach dropped out of her body.

He sighed, and Nancy reached up her other hand and placed it firmly against his chest. She deepened the kiss, closing her mouth around his bottom lip. She sucked it into her mouth, the way Steve had always done to her, and sure enough, it brought a low moan from Jonathan's throat.

She wanted him to make that sound again, wanted to prove to herself that she had caused this. She repeated the motion, and sighed when Jonathan moaned a second time. The woods surrounded them like a blanket. It was hard to breathe.

She pulled back. For a second, Jonathan's lips followed. Then he seemed to realize what was happening and retreated. Even then, his hand lingered on her face, thumb stroking her cheek. His gaze was too intense, so she looked away. Her hands were still tangled in his hair. She could feel his breath on her cheek.

"You kissed me again."

"Yeah." Nancy absently stroked the hairs on the nape of his neck. "I guess I did."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

"Nancy." Jonathan cleared his throat, and said nothing. After a long moment, he pulled away from her. "Nancy, what the hell are we?"

Nancy's chest tightened, and she dropped her hands from his neck. "I just told you I don't know."

"Shouldn't you? You're the one who kissed me. You're the one who keeps coming to my house and asking me to smoke pot with you. You're the one who talks to me at school. If you don't know how the hell am I supposed to know?"

The woods were suddenly freezing. "Why do I have to have all the answers?"

"Am I your boyfriend?"

All of the air flooded from Nancy's body. She could feel herself shaking. "What?" she demanded

"Am I your boyfriend?"

Jonathan's eyes were so brown. Nancy wanted to drown in them. She wanted to drown in general, so that she wouldn't have to have this conversation for any longer. She shook her head frantically, trying to clear it. "I had a boyfriend," she said. "I don't need a new one."

"Then what the hell are we, Nancy?"

There were ants under the surface of her skin. Everywhere she looked, she saw Barb. The trees closed in around her. "We're *alive*," she said, voice rising in pitch. "Why can't that be enough for you?"

"Why isn't it enough for *you*?" he shot back.

The thin band around Nancy's chest, the one that had made its home there for months so she could never breathe fully, tightened so much that if it were real, it would have snapped. "Because it isn't!" she shouted, leaping to her feet "You think this is living, what I'm doing? You think I'm alive! God, Jonathan, are you stupid?"

Jonathan stood and faced her. "At least I'm not stupid enough to think I'm the only one in pain!" he shouted back. "Do you pay

attention to anyone but yourself? You think I'm doing great, don't you, that Will and Mike and all of those kids are doing great? Do you even hear yourself?"

"I don't know!" Tears ran down Nancy's face. *I know Mike's hurting too*, she told herself. She had seen the circles under his eyes, just as he'd seen the ones under hers. Jonathan didn't know as much as he thought he did. "All I know is there's this pit, and it's pulling me in and I can't get out and I'm trying, okay? I'm trying so hard not to get sucked in, and you're sitting here, fine enough to wonder if I'll be your girlfriend like I'm not dying."

"At least I'm not so trapped in the past that I can't even figure out what's happening to me in the present!"

Nancy crossed her arms. "Right, like you don't have nightmares about what happened every night."

"We have to keep moving forward," Jonathan said. His voice was calm, but it was the calm of a person speaking at a funeral, with layers beneath its surface.

Nancy swiped angrily at her face, hot tears wetting her fingers. "I don't want to be Nancy anymore," she said. Her voice had gotten quiet again, as if that moment of rage had been enough to release the storm inside of her. It sounded like somebody else's voice. There could never be enough rage. "I don't want to move forward unless I get to be somebody else."

"That's fine with me. I never really wanted to be Jonathan anyway," he told her softly.

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. Whatever this was, it felt the tiniest bit like drowning. "I think I knew that."

All of a sudden, they were kissing again. Jonathan's hands around her waist pulled her close, and she ran her hands over his shoulders and up around the back of his neck. Barb would have told her not to be stupid, that this was a terrible way of dealing with things and in all likelihood textbook PTSD behavior. It didn't matter what Barb would have thought. All that mattered was the ripples against her skin as

Jonathan's fingers slid under the edge of her shirt, just for a moment before he pulled away.

Everything was cold where he wasn't touching her. Nancy leaned her head on his shoulder, and after a moment his arm went around her. It was getting dark.

"I can't promise you anything," she whispered. "Even if I wanted to. I don't even know who I'll be tomorrow. I can't commit to wanting anything." There were so many things she wanted, enough to fill the entire upside-down. Sometimes it felt like the weight of it would crush her.

Jonathan nodded. She couldn't tell whether or not he understood.

The old Nancy would have felt sorry for him, maybe even sorry enough to hold him and offer him something she wasn't sure she had. The new Nancy looked away.

"Am I still allowed to kiss you?"

His words startled her into looking back. Jonathan looked sheepish.

A smile broke out on Nancy's face, and she leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Yes," she told him, pushing a strand of hair out of his face. "For now."

His lips were warm as they met her skin, and for a fleeting moment, Nancy almost felt alive.